

## **Sermon**

**September 12, 2021**

**Season of Creation – Abundance**

**Deuteronomy 8:7-18; Psalm 19; Revelation 22:1-5; Matthew 6:25-34**

My preaching assignment today, during this Season of Creation, is to talk about Abundance. It is my abundant pleasure to do so. It is also abundantly daunting! In English, the words “abundance” and “undulation” are related. You can hear it. The shared letters between the two mean “wave.” And whereas undulation means “waviness”, abundance means “from a wave.” So when we talk about abundance, there is one sense of an overwhelming, tidal wave, supply of whatever it is. When we pray for abundance, we are asking not only for enough, but also more.

Mary and I have been watching the independent Bible TV series, The Chosen. And not to give anything away, but when Jesus meets Peter and James and John at the lakeside after a night of fruitless fishing, and says, “Well, put our nets down on the other side of the boat.” And give a grumbling chuckle. But they do and instantly the nets are filled to overflowing, threatening to capsize the boats, and everyone is laughing and so excited because, well, there was an abundance of fish! Watch it. You’ll smile. The abundance of it will take your breath away.

I’d also like to compliment all, or whoever is responsible, for the name of the thrift shop that is associated with St. Ben’s: the Abundance Shop. I like it. I donate there and I shop there, especially looking for the jigsaw puzzles and books. Here’s what I draw from the name of the shop. People out of their Abundance donate items for the common good. As to the buyers, there is no need to buy new things, or pay the associated price, when Abundant things of reasonable condition are available for

a reasonable cost. Where there is abundance, there is plenty to go around. Esta told me a few months ago, after the shop re-opened, that she was surprised that donors still have things to give. Ah, but we live in a nation of abundant things, and abundant new things, all of the time. Twenty years ago, when as the director of an interfaith organization I helped to organize an interfaith rally after 9/11, the main Muslim speaker told the 500 people gathered there, we Muslims are not in this country to destroy it, but to share in its abundance and prosperity.

In Deuteronomy passage, we hear that the land of Canaan (though previously occupied) was given to the people of Israel as an Abundant gift, full of good food and plentiful water and even iron and copper, that was more than sufficient to sustain a good life. AND... that the people of God, God's chosen, might do well to remember the giftedness of the land. Our situation and history in this land has many similarities with the Deuteronomic story, which were not lost on our progenitors. The fertility of the soil, the vastness of the territory, the promise to new immigrants, the free-flowing of goods, and the fact that here also, on the North American continent, there were people already living here.

You see, with the topic of abundance, there are always snares. The Deuteronomist says, "Take heed lest you forget the LORD your God," after you have multiplied the wealth of your household. Do not think it is by your power and your power and cleverness alone that you have become wealthy. It is rather due to God's provision and generosity. And, we might add, often because of the class of workers who are not paid according to the value of their labor. There are so many ways to go

with this sermon, and not enough time. Abundance is not always evenly shared. Consider these aspects of Abundance in your mind or move on with me.

The first verses of Psalm 19 are famous for the oratorio of Haydn. “The heavens are telling the glory of God,” and so on. I find them very interesting and inspiring. My son Philip would agree that looking up at the sky is one way to be astounded by the vastness and beauty of creation. It can be overwhelming, this abundance of the universe. At one point in his growing up, Philip told Mary that he knew he was getting older, because earlier he could only think of the cosmos for maybe five seconds, and now, at that point in his life, he could contemplate the cosmos for maybe twenty seconds! The abundance of creation is truly beyond our comprehension, and paradoxically, the more we understand it, the more we realize that we don’t know. Or at least, that’s how I see it.

It’s like the illustration of a Mandelbrot set in which the answers to a formula are mapped in two dimensions. There are marvelous shapes and, upon magnifying them, you learn that the beauty and complexity is duplicated on each level of magnification. IN other words, as far as creation is concerned, the wonders never cease. They will by far exhaust our ability to contemplate or comprehend them.

The thing about the first verses of Psalm 19 is the sentence: “There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard.” Which I take to mean that the heavens don’t speak strictly, but offer a witness that is available to those who are able to see it. Analogically, then, even though abundance is present in all aspects of life, and probably is an essential component of life, some people do not see it, but rather gravitate toward the concept of scarcity more easily, or the idea of a zero-

sum world. In other words, there is not enough abundance in the world for everybody to receive enough of it. Moving on, if you wish.

I can understand why the passage from Revelation 22 is included today. This is the vision of the Holy City on the other side of our present tribulation amidst abundance. It is beautiful. It is plentiful. It will have life and light. The City is a great promise. Not only do we live in Abundance now, but we will be doing so in the future. It is such a compelling vision, in fact, that many who follow it are willing to let the present reality go in an instance. No need to sustain it, because God is going to make all things new, including our broken ecosystem. Once again, a line of thought that merits more thought than I can give it.

But two additional comments. Martin Luther and other reformers gave great weight to a believer's trusting in God's promises. If God said it, then we can count on the trustworthiness and reliability of those words. The spiritual hymn says it. We can lean on those everlasting arms of God. Therein lies twenty sermons.

And second, I am struck by the verse that says that, in this city, "There shall no more be anything accursed." This can be read in two ways. The first is that that which is accursed in this world, like, say, mosquitoes, will not be present in the Holy City. There will be nothing to bother us, nothing to dismay us in that city. A second reading, though, is that in this new Jerusalem, nothing shall be accursed. In other words, there will be no reason to curse anything. Like the vision that Peter saw of the living things being lowered on a sheet from heaven, many of whom were considered unclean, the answer is that nothing which is made by God is unclean. So no cursing of mosquitoes or vermin or anything. I hope this means that that, as a

consequence, mosquitoes will not bite. God's promise is for a community of Abundant love and Abundant regard.

Lastly to the gospel lesson. Consider the lilies of the field. Like most passages of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, and like a Mandelbrot set, things go deep.

Jesus has been talking about the faithful life, concerning the giving of alms, praying, fasting, light, serving two masters. As a result, his hearers, and us as well, if we read the whole sermon through at one time, might be overwhelmed, and not in an abundant way. It's like listening to all of your friends give you advice on your golf swing, all at once. Or going to a performance review and finding out about twenty behaviors that need improvement. It's bound to create within us a feeling of anxiety and worry. Can we do what Jesus expects of us? Can we remember all of his wise words to us? We can find ourselves dealing with an abundance of precepts. This manual for life that some people call the Bible can get to be too much!

And Jesus says, Okay, let's make it easy. "Do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on." Instead, trust that God will provide for you in all of these ways. I have been known to have anxiety in and about my life. Up to the point of my recent retirement, I gave a fair amount of time to my concerns about working hard enough, being good enough, being employable enough, studying hard enough, being smart enough. But Jesus reminds us of the Deuteronomy passage, against thinking that it is the power and the might of our hands that has gotten us this far. It is not. We have not done it alone.

This word “anxiety” is derived from the verbs “to narrow” and “to constrict” and even “to be strangled.” All of these make sense. God also knows, in our present state of existence and necessities, that there is ample reason to be concerned about our lives. So being relieved from Abundant anxiety requires our grasping onto the assurances of Jesus.

AND, Jesus adds, “seek first God’s realm and God’s righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.” The thing about abundance is that it is like the Holy Spirit. It blows where it will, and it always seems to be blowing somewhere. If necessary, be patient, and the Holy Spirit will blow where you are too. And those of us have been duly blessed with abundance, well, it’s not much of a puzzlement to know how to be partners with the Holy Spirit and bless others as well, Abundantly. Amen.